

1904.
NEW ZEALAND.

PUBLIC TRUST OFFICE

(REPORT RELATING TO THE).

Presented to both Houses of the General Assembly by Command of His Excellency.

The PUBLIC TRUSTEE to the Right Hon. the COLONIAL TREASURER.

SIR,—

Wellington, 31st March, 1904.

I have the honour to submit a statement of the business done by the Public Trust Office during the past twelve months as compared with previous years.

The figures disclose a gratifying all-round increase. The net profits on the year's operations amounted to £7,897 13s. 4d.

A building is badly needed for the Head Office. The present accommodation is altogether inadequate for the staff. There is no privacy for clients doing business at the counter. There is a typewriter in the room of the Chief Clerk, and one in that of the Inspector. These girls must leave the rooms when business of a confidential nature is being discussed. The cubic air-space of the two larger rooms is barely sufficient for the number of clerks employed therein. If the new building is not soon available fresh quarters will have to be obtained, otherwise the growth of the institution will be arrested.

During January last a visit was made by me to the principal Native reserves administered by the office under the West Coast Settlement Reserves Acts. A large area of these reserves is now held under perpetual lease. Some of the unleased parts are at present inaccessible, but when circumstances are favourable the balance not required for use by Natives will be from time to time submitted for settlement. The total area of the reserves is about 188,000 acres; of this, 148,712 acres, being nearly four-fifths of the total, is leased or held under occupation license by Natives. The total rents amount to £25,796. After paying rates, land-tax, office commission, and other charges there remained for payment to the Natives interested £22,703.

The system of occupation licenses was introduced to encourage the Natives to abandon the communism of the kaingas. A Native who has his own plot of ground will be more likely to cultivate it, fence it, and use it to the best advantage than if the place was the common property of the hapu.

When a grant contains more land than is needed for the support of the Natives interested in it the portion not so required is submitted to competition under perpetual lease, with revaluation at periods of twenty-one years for the purpose of fixing the ground-rent, the tenant's improvements being protected. If the Natives occupying the remainder desire it, the whole or a part of the unleased land is given to individuals, partners, or families who want a portion for their exclusive occupation.

The division is agreed upon after consultation between the Reserves Agent and the beneficiaries of the grant, the boundaries being fixed subject to survey. When the survey is made licenses are issued, with accurate plans indorsed. The documents are of a simple nature, but they give the holder an exclusive right to the area mentioned and protection for his crops and improvements. The holdings vary in size from two or three acres up to two hundred or more. Some of the holders complain of having to pay a rent for these holdings, but the reason is this: In hardly any case do all the Natives interested in a grant live upon it. Sometimes a few only do. The others may be anywhere in Taranaki or in other parts of New Zealand, many of them permanently absent. In such cases those who are getting the exclusive benefit of a piece of ground belonging in part to others should pay something to the others for it. A rent is fixed, which the occupier pays. As these rents are all pooled and repaid to those interested, including these same licensees, according to the value of their respective shares in the grant, there is no hardship, while justice is done to the absent owners. If every Native interested lived on a grant it would be easy, pending changes by succession, to give families or individuals a piece of ground of a value representing their respective interests, and then no rent need be or would be collected; but this is a hypothetical condition of affairs, not existing in reality.

Natives holding occupation licenses are as a rule more industrious and progressive than those living under the communal system. The number of occupation licenses in force is 303; area held under them, 20,304 acres; average size, about 66 acres.